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# Organizational Secrecy and the FBI's COINTELPRO–Black Nationalist Hate Groups Program, 1967–1971

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## Abstract

In this article, we explain how secrecy influenced the communication and decision-making processes within COINTELPRO–Black Nationalist Hate Groups, the FBI's covert program to disrupt left-leaning Black political organizations between 1967 and 1971. Memos exchanged between the FBI Director and field offices reveal how the organization strategized to conceal its identity as the source of anonymous communication. The Bureau developed explicit techniques for managing the *content* of their messages, the *materials* used to construct print messages, and the *distribution* of those messages. The Bureau's techniques suggest that organizational secrecy involves a high degree of coordination between members, but it may also endanger the organization's longevity and the public welfare.

**Keywords:** organizational secrecy, FBI, COINTELPRO, anonymity, Black Panther Party

Secrecy is often met with suspicion and distrust. Because secrecy involves intentional concealment (Bok, 1983), sometimes including one's identity, it has been a source of conflict over power (Mobley, 2012), trust (Anand & Rosen, 2008), and national security (Priest & Arkin, 2011), all of which suggest political conspiracy, corruption, or repression. Julian Assange, the driving force behind the Internet site WikiLeaks, recently highlighted secrecy's liabilities when he leaked a quarter of a million U.S. classified diplomatic cables in

November 2010. From his perspective, “the state’s secrets can never be anything but its crimes; having secrets is already proof of criminal and immoral political activities” (Horn, 2011, p. 119).

The controversy surrounding WikiLeaks highlights ongoing public disagreement about the function of government-held secrets for American democracy. The 1997 Commission on Protecting and Reducing Government Secrecy (popularly known as the Moynihan Commission) surveyed the long history of U.S. government secrecy and reported that more than 400,000 new secrets are created annually at the highest level. In 1994, it was estimated that the U.S. government had more than 1.5 billion pages of classified materials that were at least 25 years old (Moynihan, 1997). Recognizing the sheer number of classified secrets and covert operations, we explore how covert organizations actually maintain their secrecy.

Many government agencies, notably the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and FBI, often operate in secretive, clandestine, and covert ways. Scott (2013) observes that covert operations are those conducted to hide the identity of the sponsoring organization, whereas clandestine refers to concealment of the operations themselves (p. 13). This study examines *both* the covert and clandestine efforts of one particular organization tasked with the job of protecting national security: the FBI. In particular, we analyze the FBI’s internal communication regarding COINTELPRO–Black National Hate Groups, a counterintelligence program that sought to disrupt left-wing Black political organizations between 1967 and 1971. The entire COINTELPRO program itself was a closely guarded FBI secret because the program’s mission was illegal. Secret memos exchanged between FBI agents involved with this program foregrounded strategies to keep their activities hidden from other federal offices, targeted organizations, and the public.

In the following section we review the literature on organizational secrecy. Then, we provide a brief history of COINTELPRO, explain our method, and describe our findings. We explain how the goal of concealing their operations structured the FBI’s written communication. This goal led agents to strategize methods for hiding the identities of agents as sources of anonymous messages. Thus, agents developed specific and precise techniques for preparing and distributing their messages. We conclude with a discussion of the practical and ethical implications of secrecy for organizations that rely on it to avoid accountability for their actions.

## Literature Review

### *Organizational Secrecy*

Defined at its most fundamental level, secrecy involves “the intentional withholding of information from specific individuals” (Anand & Rosen, 2008, p. 97). Although this definition appears straightforward, decades of research on secrecy indicate the contrary. The foundation of secrecy theory was laid in the first two decades of the 20th century when two German sociologists, Georg Simmel (1858–1918) and Max Weber (1864–1920), responded to the changes and implications of the industrial institution. Weber (1946/1958) understood secrecy as a creation of and tool for bureaucracy. For Weber, secrecy was essentially a “utilitarian concept having to do with keeping the means of administration secret from those

who are administered" (Blank, 2009, p. 60). Simmel (1906), in contrast, focused on the impact that secrets played on the relations between individuals and their community. He argued that secrecy formed the basis for all relationships in society; secrecy itself "is the structure of human interaction" (p. 462). These two distinct approaches to secrecy have guided recent research on secrecy at the personal (Bok, 1983; Goodall, 2006) and institutional levels (Colella, Paetzold, Zandkoochi, & Wesson, 2007; Costas & Grey, 2014; Gibson, 2014; Grey, 2014).

Much of the current literature on organizational and governmental secrecy takes a Weberian viewpoint to address issues surrounding secret documents created by the U.S. government, and to assess the difficulties of acquiring access to those materials (Amer, 2009; Dempsey, 2009; Grey, 2014). Most of these studies theorize secrecy from an informational perspective in which secrecy is imperative to protect valuable information. Costas and Grey (2014) complicate this assumption by arguing that the social nature of secrecy in organizations is equally important. Their sociological theorization of *secrecy as a social process* implicitly highlights the communicative dimensions of secrecy. By examining organizational secrecy from an informational perspective *and* as a social process, features of secrecy become foregrounded, including power structures, labor, ethical consciousness, and anonymity.

One major feature of secrecy involves the protection and establishment of power structures. As Bok (1983) observes, secrecy inherently presupposes a separation between the keepers of the secret and those who are excluded. The social inclusions and exclusions created by practices of secrecy are bound by structures of control whereby secrets, or "prized possessions" (Black, 1988), allow individuals to control other people. Conversely, secrets require quite a bit of *self*-control from the role of the secret keeper. Secret holders, such as the "power elite" (Mills, 1959), occupy a position of power in that "by withholding knowledge, they are able to shape a particular construction of reality" (Keane, 2008, p. 109). As we suggest below, such secrets may or may not be accurate. The revelation of secrets, both true and false, can lead to disillusionment and loss of trust.

Although organizational secrecy poses several potential problems, the actual practice of secrecy requires sustained physical, emotional, and communicative labor. Liebeskind (1997) notes that keeping organizational secrets is both a difficult and costly endeavor due to the compensation given to employees as a way to encourage them to keep secrets, the structural isolation of geographic separation, and restrictions that go into protecting organizational knowledge. The emotional and intellectual efforts of secret keeping are an additional burden. Lane and Wegner (1995) argue that secret keeping is a performance that requires not only "stringent behavioral proscriptions [to] ensure that the performer is on edge whenever there is the potential for disclosure," but also careful repair work when something slips or a secret is revealed (p. 237). The work of framing messages about secrets requires additional effort to the already labor-intensive process. Dark side activities, such as secrecy, are often "communicatively masked to make the illegitimate appear legitimate, dissensus appear to be consensus and to facilitate exploitation" (Linstead, Maréchal, & Griffin, 2014, p. 171). Mobley (2012) adds that no group can actually achieve perfect secrecy while functioning effectively and that every adaptation or new advantage attained by

groups also produces new vulnerabilities. Thus, the work that goes into creating and maintaining boundaries of secrecy is strenuous.

In addition to posing practical challenges, scholarship has noted unique ethical challenges for organizations that use secrecy to achieve their goals (Anand & Rosen, 2008), for organizations that go to great lengths to hide their identity, and for our own responsibilities—as consumers and citizens—to potentially reveal secrets (Scott, 2013). Exposing organizational secrets can place people, especially employees, in an ethical conundrum because organizational members are often required to report unethical acts, but breaking the secrecy around the act itself may border on the unethical or even illegal (Miceli & Near, 1992).

Our analysis of the FBI's COINTELPRO memos is particularly concerned with the practical and ethical challenges facing organizations that endeavor to hide their activities through the use of anonymous communication. Anonymity is partly based on the degree to which a message source is unknown (Anonymous, 1998). Hidden organizations conceal their identity through organizational practices according to the degree to which people know about the message source. This can come in the form of complete anonymity or through partial anonymity, such as through the use of pseudonyms, or fictitious alternative identities (Scott, 2013). Rains and Scott (2007) observe that the success of an organization's attempt at secrecy often hinges on whether recipients view anonymous messages favorably and the extent to which they believe they can identify the sender. Recipients are more likely to evaluate the organization positively if they cannot and do not wish to identify the source.

In this article, we highlight the communication strategies that the FBI used to keep COINTELPRO activities hidden from individuals outside of the Bureau. Stohl and Stohl (2011) argue that the distinctive communicative foundations of hidden organizations pose some of the greatest organizational and theoretical challenges and opportunities. Scott (2013) challenges scholars to unmask the organizational processes associated with hidden organizations. By drawing on the institutional viewpoint of secrecy and by approaching secrecy as a social process, this study focuses on *how* one hidden organization maintained secrecy.

### *History of the FBI's COINTELPRO*

Between 1956 and 1971, FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover initiated a series of counterintelligence programs referred to as COINTELPROs to undermine dissident movements believed to pose a threat to the security of the United States. FBI agents throughout the country engaged in a series of covert and illegal actions to circumvent Supreme Court rulings that protected the rights of dissidents. In one of these rulings, the Supreme Court reinterpreted the Smith Act<sup>1</sup> to conclude that speech advocating the violent overthrow of the government was protected unless that rhetoric led to violent conduct (Theoharis, 2004). Because the Bureau could not arrest law-abiding political organizations, the FBI sought to disrupt organizing efforts by spreading distrust and factionalism among members of targeted organizations, discouraging nonmembers from supporting activist efforts, and preventing movements from accessing resources.

In the decades immediately following the passage of The Smith Act, Hoover deliberately kept the Bureau's counter-subversive activities secret from Congress, the Department of Justice, and others outside of the FBI because counterintelligence operations violated civil liberties. Hiding these actions served the FBI in a variety of ways. First, it enabled Hoover to maintain his position as FBI Director. If knowledge of COINTELPRO became known to the Bureau's critics, Hoover's own credibility would have been badly damaged. Second, Hoover believed that the Bureau's success hinged on maintaining a strong public image. Public knowledge of the Palmer Raids had generated negative public perceptions of the FBI, and much of Hoover's work as the Director involved cultivating relationships with the media. Finally, engaging in covert actions gave the agency insularity and autonomy. Technically, Hoover reported to the Department of Justice and the Attorney General. Keeping actions hidden from these offices enabled the Bureau to efficiently undermine dissident movements that had not broken the law without openly violating prosecutorial rules.

Hoover instituted the first COINTELPRO targeting the Communist Party–USA on August 28, 1956. Over the course of 15 years, Hoover expanded COINTELPRO programs to target six additional movements including the Socialist Workers Party, Puerto Rican nationalists, the Ku Klux Klan, various civil rights and Black power organizations (which they referred to as Black Nationalist Hate Groups), the New Left, and the American Indian Movement. Hoover routinely asserted that surveillance of all dissident movements was necessary to prevent the spread of communism.

Hoover initiated the COINTELPRO–Black Nationalist Hate Group (BNHG) program in 1967. He directed field agents to identify imaginative actions designed to “expose, disrupt, misdirect, discredit, or otherwise neutralize the activities” of Black activist organizations (Director to All Offices, August 25, 1967). This program targeted a variety of civil rights and Black Power organizations with different and sometimes competing ideologies, including the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), Revolutionary Action Movement (RAM), Deacons for Defense and Justice, Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), Nation of Islam (NOI), US Organization, and the Black Panther Party (BPP). These groups were not selected on the basis of their violent behavior but for their *potential* for provoking violence within the Black community. However, this perceived threat was based on concerns about the rhetoric of the Black left, not on evidence of planned attempts to engage in violence or overthrow the government.

Part of Hoover's motivation for targeting Black dissident movements was to prevent “the rise of a Messiah . . . who could unify, and electrify, the militant black nationalist movement” (Director to Sullivan, February 29, 1968). Visible public figures including Martin Luther King, H. Rap Brown, and Stokely Carmichael were targets of extensive counterintelligence activity. In the fall of 1968, Hoover focused the Bureau's attention on the BPP. Due to their rapid growth and revolutionary rhetoric, Hoover told *New York Times* readers that the Panthers were the “greatest threat to the internal security of the country” (Book III, 1976, p. 188). Between 1967 and 1971, the FBI had launched 295 counterintelligence operations against Black activists under the COINTELPRO–BNHG program; 233 of them were directed toward the Panthers (Self, 2006, p. 45).

The program ended in 1971 after a group of activists calling themselves the Citizens' Commission to Investigate the FBI broke into FBI offices in Media, Pennsylvania, and burglarized the Bureau's files. The full extent of COINTELPRO was revealed after the Justice Department responded to a Freedom of Information Act request and released the memos to the public in 1977. In 1976, a Senate report concluded that the Bureau's "lawless tactics" used in COINTELPRO operations fomented "violence and unrest" (Self, 2006, p. 45). U.S. district Judge Thomas Griesa ruled against the FBI in a lawsuit filed by the Socialist Workers Party and Young Socialist Alliance, finding that the Bureau's operations were "patently unconstitutional" (Blackstock, 1988, p. 8). Despite its engagement in illegal activities, COINTELPRO continued for 15 years because there was virtually no external oversight of the Bureau's conduct. Hoover kept extensive files about the immoral or illegal behavior of many political figures, including congressional leaders, attorneys general, and presidents (Theoharis, 1991). These files quite possibly enabled the FBI to avoid scrutiny from public officials (Cunningham, 2003).

The COINTELPRO era of the FBI provides a unique opportunity for understanding the internal communication of hidden organizations. COINTELPRO operated before the amended Freedom of Information and Privacy Acts of 1974. Thus, FBI agents could presume that none of their written communication would be shared outside the Bureau. Furthermore, FBI procedures for handling and circulating internal memos were designed to hide illegal surveillance and counterintelligence tactics from Congress and the Department of Justice. Typically, FBI offices filed and indexed all of their internal written communication; however, memos referencing illegal actions were routed to the FBI director's office or the office of a designated FBI assistant director. To prevent individuals outside of the agency from discovering these actions, Hoover ordered his assistant directors and supervisors to destroy these files on a regular basis. Public exposure of COINTELPRO is due in large part to directors' and supervisors' failure to fully comply with this order (Theoharis, 2004). Prior to their discovery, agents had no reason to use "Bureau 'code' to conceal the true nature of activities" and thus were "free" to write candidly in their memos (Cunningham, 2004, p. 39). Of course, agents were not entirely unfettered in their language choices; certainly, a desire to maintain in good standing with Hoover and the Bureau influenced their writing. However, the internal memos exchanged between FBI agents offers an expanded glimpse into the communication practices engaged by members of hidden organizations when they thought no one else was looking.

The FBI's written internal memos reveal detailed organizational processes designed to keep COINTELPRO hidden. Although the identities of FBI agents were a matter of public record, the agency strategized to conceal their efforts from others. The Bureau's primary strategy was to create and deliver anonymous messages to members of targeted organizations, public officials, and local communities in which organizations were active. Given that the program lasted for more than five years undetected, they were largely successful. To gain further understanding about the organizational processes involved in maintaining COINTELPRO's covert status, we ask, what communication strategies did the FBI use to hide the identities of FBI agents as the source of these messages?

## Method

Because Hoover required that each field office disrupt local activist communities within their jurisdictions, Special Agents in Charge (SACs) of each field office were expected to submit proposals to the national office for approval. Field offices could not move forward until Hoover or one of his assistant directors provided written consent. Consequently, Hoover's office exchanged copious memos with SACs each week. These memos have been a valuable resource in understanding the cultural and political implications of the FBI's language and strategies (Cunningham & Browning, 2004; Drabble, 2004, 2007, 2008) and in theorizing repressive techniques used against target organizations (Cunningham, 2003). Extending this work, we analyzed the memos to identify the ways in which the agents strategized to conceal their role in creating and distributing deceptive messages.

## Data Sources

In 1977, 50,000 pages of COINTELPRO memos were released to the public and collected on microfilm by Scholarly Resources, Inc. We reviewed memos organized within the BNHG file, and analyzed those memos from that file that describe explicit counterintelligence activities proposed by SACs in various field offices or recommended by the national office. We excluded memos that solely provided intelligence information about Black activist activity. In total, we analyzed more than 1,300 pages of BNHG files written between 1967 and 1971. All files consisted of internal correspondence between the Director, J. Edgar Hoover; the Bureau's Domestic Intelligence Division head, William Sullivan; and SACs within the different field offices across the United States. These files also include news articles about targeted organizations and samples of materials designed by field agents for distribution to targeted individuals and organizations.

Our sample is limited by a couple of factors. The memos collected by Scholarly Resources, Inc. may not represent the complete collection of memos exchanged by the Bureau during the COINTELPRO era. As Theoharis (2004) notes, Hoover ordered field officers to regularly destroy counterintelligence files. Furthermore, Cunningham (2004) observes that the total number of quarterly reports filed in 1968 represent only 65% of the estimated total had each field office actually filed reports as requested (p. 294). Another limitation is that the FBI redacted the names of informants and particular targets from the files. Cunningham (2004) observes that the FBI's censoring is inconsistent, and events are usually discussed in a sequence of memos, so it is sometimes possible to identify the redacted information (p. 38). Finally, although our empirical analysis focuses on internal communication texts, we do not have access to the informal communication between agents. Without this informal communication, we cannot know how agents discussed secrecy beyond the Director's watch. Written information is inherently more vulnerable to exposure, and agents might have refrained from writing particularly sensitive or incriminating details. Despite these limitations, the files provided us with the rare opportunity to examine how members of an organization strategized to maintain their secrets.



### ***Data Analysis***

Analyzing the internal communication of an organization through their texts is a fruitful research method that allows researchers to examine language-in-use (Saldaña, 2013). Strategic internal communication provides a valuable framework for examining the inner workings of organizing (Men, 2014). Acknowledging that this study would focus on organizational secrecy, we used the constant comparative method (Charmaz, 2009) as a way to map the strategies associated with upholding organizational secrecy.

To begin our analysis, we each read a small sampling of the same memos to acquaint ourselves with the material and to discuss general observations, themes, and patterns within the files. We developed and refined a working schema and an eclectic set of codes according to the contents of the sample (Saldaña, 2013). We noticed that the focus of much of the content of the memos revolved around concealing the FBI's identity as the message source. Based on this observation, we identified all of the memos that referenced the Director's decision to approve or deny proposals on the basis of their ability to maintain the FBI's covert status. We then identified the strategies and techniques that agents and the Director recommended to hide their identities as message sources. Each author individually coded approximately 600 pages of memos. From our coding, we identified an overarching strategy and typology of techniques. The consistent discussions and checks between the two authors throughout the process provided more meticulous attention to the language and deeper reflection on the emergent patterns and meanings within these files.

In the following analysis, we explain the strategies the FBI used to hide their identities as sources of communication designed to disrupt and discredit their targets. The memos reveal that hiding COINTELPRO operations was an energy-intensive objective that involved a systematic concern for the content and distribution of messages. Space constraints prevent us from recounting all the examples within the memos that illustrate these typologies. Instead, we identify typologies that agents proposed or carried out and provide representative examples of each type of action to offer a snapshot of the correspondence within the COINTELPRO–BNHG files.

### **Findings**

An analysis of the COINTELPRO memos provides insight into the organization's strategies and techniques to keep the program's existence and informants hidden from its targets and the general public. SAC proposals routinely provided detailed explanations of how proposed communication should not be traced back to the FBI. Concomitantly, the Director's decision to deny or approve requests frequently hinged on whether he believed that the actions could be conducted covertly. The regularity of the memos' references to the covert status of their actions indicates that secrecy was an important criterion—if not the most important criterion—for evaluating proposed actions. The Director frequently rejected proposals if he believed that they had potential to expose the FBI's efforts to disrupt lawful political organizing.<sup>2</sup>

Director-approved strategies principally revolved around the creation and circulation of anonymous print and telephone messages. A brief discussion of the Director's reasons for rejecting specific proposals illuminates his preference for anonymous communication.

Because the Bureau relied upon informants to gather intelligence about leftist political organizations, the Director sought to avoid exposing the identities of informants to individuals outside of the Bureau. In a memo denying San Diego's request to use an informant to spread a rumor among members of US Organization, a cultural Black nationalist group, the Director explained that "the initiation of . . . a rumor by the informant could come to the attention of local authorities who could undoubtedly pursue such information. Subsequent investigation could result in the rumor being traced to the informant" (Director to San Diego, March 2, 1970).

Agents were also discouraged from using third parties to distribute information that might expose the FBI's efforts. The Director even considered establishing FBI connections with the post office as a risk. The Boston field office requested permission to rent a post office box under a pseudonym to receive mail responding to one of their counterfeit newsletters. The Director requested more information, warning agents that, "in this type of operation, it is desirable that not even the Postal Inspectors be aware of the identity of the Post Office box lessee" (Director to Boston, May 9, 1969).

Rather than personally deliver information or go through third parties, agents' strategies routinely involved the creation and circulation of anonymous print and telephone messages. After denying a request to use informants or third parties, the Director usually recommended this line of action. For example, the Director asserted that Mobile agents could disparage the reputation of the BPP "through an anonymous telephone call to the pastor of the church thereby eliminating the necessity of involving a ghetto informant in counterintelligence matters" (Director to Mobile, January 6, 1971.)

Most of the Bureau's anonymous messages took the form of letters, leaflets, and phone calls that were then sent to individuals who participated in or supported activists' efforts. Agents also anonymously circulated publicly available print material, such as newspaper columns, that critiqued targeted organizations. Message patterns across the memos, as well as previous historical research, highlight how the organization managed its internal and external communication to keep the source of COINTELPRO messages a secret. In the following sections, we discuss the FBI's strategies for hiding their identity as the sources of COINTELPRO's external communication. The Bureau discussed multiple aspects of their external communication: the *content* of their messages, the *materials* used to construct print messages, and the *distribution* of those messages. As we explain, many memos explained how decisions about message content were influenced by efforts to conceal the FBI as the message source and the use of informants in intelligence gathering. However, the memos reveal even greater concern with how the materials used to create and distribute print materials would conceal the FBI's involvement. See Table 1 for a list of concealment strategies.

**Table 1.** Typology of FBI Concealment Strategies

Strategy type	Strategy	Example discussed in FBI memos
Anonymous Message Content	Use pseudonyms	"The letter . . . would state . . . 'Thought you might be amused by or have a use for these. Signed, a budding cartoonist.'" (Director to Chicago, July 31, 1969)
	Create elaborate backstories	"First let me explain that I am a Negro and a Real Estate Agent by profession. Most of my business is concerned with the sale and leasing of farm land in the Knoxville, Tennessee area." (Fictionalized letter submitted by New York for the Director's approval, July 17, 1970)
	Include jargon and factual errors	"Unless we act now to contain these Apostles of Anarchy and Disciples of Destruction, our American White Christian Civilization is headed for certain doom." (Proposed leaflet from St. Louis approved by the Director, July 29, 1969)
	Create unique messages	"[E]ach letter must be original and worded to suit the particular organization to which it is being sent." (WFO to Director, January 12, 1971)
	Rely on widely available information	"Information . . . being furnished to the subjects will not compromise any Jackson source as information has been made available to the Jackson Division through many sources." (Jackson to Director, May 11, 1968)
Anonymous Message Materials	Use commercially available paper	"The article should be . . . mailed in commercially purchased envelopes." (Director to San Francisco, January 9, 1969)
	Use authentic stationery	"This letter should be typed on a stationery most likely to be used by a member of the Yale University Alumni." (Director to New Haven, August 25, 1969)
	Use authentic printing technology	"[A] manually operated typewriter with a somewhat used ribbon should be utilized." (Director to Cincinnati, March 29, 1971)
Anonymous Delivery Techniques	Mail materials from specific locations	"Authority is granted to New Haven for the preparation and mailing of an anonymous communication . . . The communication should be mailed from New Haven . . ." (Director to New Haven, August 25, 1969)
	Third parties must be trusted to maintain FBI confidentiality	"The person to whom this dissemination is made must be advised that the Bureau is not to be divulged as the source of this information." (Director to New York, August 13, 1969)

***Repetition as an Internal Message Content Strategy***

Before we elaborate on the organization's external message strategies, we pause to note that the formal structure of the memos foregrounds the value of organizational secrecy among FBI agents. In their initial proposals, agents routinely closed their memos with a sentence that confirmed that the action could not be "traced back to," "compromise," or "cause embarrassment to the Bureau." The Director's response would almost invariably confirm whether or not he agreed that the action could potentially expose the FBI or informants.

The high priority given to maintaining secrecy is highlighted in the Director's notes at the end of every memo responding to a field agent's request. These notes summarized the Director's previous relevant correspondence with field offices and usually reiterated the field office's insistence that proposed actions could not be traced back to the Bureau. For example, Detroit closed one proposal to send a letter under a pseudonym to local media with a typical remark, "the usual precautions will be taken to insure it cannot be traced back to the Bureau" (Detroit to Director, March 6, 1969). Although the Director's letter approving Detroit's proposal was only five sentences long, two of those sentences reiterated the value of maintaining the Bureau's covert status. The second sentence reminded field agents to "take the usual precautions to insure this letter cannot be traced to the Bureau," and the final sentence concluded, "There is no possibility of embarrassment to the Bureau" (Director to Detroit, March 25, 1969).

The content surrounding references to the FBI's covert status suggests that references to avoiding FBI exposure were not purely instrumental; frequently, SAC requests asserted that their actions could not be traced back to the FBI but did not offer additional explanation. SACs sometimes closed follow-up messages regarding previously approved actions with confirmation that those actions could not be traced back to the Bureau (Pittsburgh to Director, June 15, 1970). Given the frequency of such remarks, the importance of hiding the FBI's work could not have been newsworthy to the memos' readers. From a rhetorical perspective, the routine references to maintaining secrecy might have more to do with establishing COINTELPRO's identity as a secret operation than with sharing ideas or information (Burke, 1969). The SACs' regular assurances and the Director's redundant reminders and confirmations that operations would safeguard COINTELPRO's covert status conferred relational meaning about the identities and value of agents themselves. Reaffirmation and confirmation that outside individuals should not be able to trace COINTELPRO actions back to the Bureau served to solidify the value of secrecy and conferred special status among FBI agents as guardians of privileged information.

#### *Message Content Techniques Designed to Hide FBI Agents as Sources of Communication*

The Director's strong preference for anonymous communication was rooted in his desire to keep Bureau techniques and the identities of informants secret from people outside of the agency. Messages were designed not only to hide the source's identity but to also mislead recipients by having the appearance of originating from someone outside of the FBI. The Bureau used a variety of techniques to direct recipients away from the FBI as the message source. The most common technique was the construction of pseudonyms. Agents routinely sent counterfeit letters to members of targeted organizations suggesting that other members stole resources, were police or FBI informants, or had engaged in other forms of illicit behavior. (In many cases, the information contained in these letters was false.) The purpose of these letters was to spread distrust among members of Black political organizations. Signatures on these letters indicated the fictitious source's vague affiliation with targeted activist organizations, such as "A friend of Sister Angela," "A Concerned Brother" (Director to Chicago, November 3, 1970), and "A concerned sister" (Director to Detroit, September 15, 1969). Chicago agents created cartoons insinuating that the white antiwar organization Students for a Democratic Society was controlling the BPP, and sent

it to the Panthers with a note signed, "A budding cartoonist" (Director to Chicago, July 31, 1969).

In some instances, agents invented rationales and elaborate backstories explaining the necessity of anonymous communication. In an effort to discourage a foundation from giving a grant to SNCC, New York agents sent the foundation a letter from a fictional Black real estate developer. The letter explained that as a "good Christian," the author was compelled to report that SNCC intended to defraud them. The letter concluded, "I hope you understand that due to my occupation and position in my home town I cannot give you my name," and was signed, "a friend" (New York to Director, July 17, 1970).

Less frequently, agents deliberately misattributed their messages to known individuals. Agents used this strategy repeatedly in letters sent to Black Panther member Eldridge Cleaver. Because Cleaver was living in Algeria and had limited ability to contact members in the United States, agents reasoned that Cleaver was unlikely to follow up and confirm the identity of the letters' authors. In a letter designed to foment distrust between BPP leader Huey Newton and his former Minister of Information Eldridge Cleaver, the San Francisco office drafted a letter disparaging Newton and signed it, "Big Man." The reference to "Big Man" referred to another member of the BPP whose name was redacted from the files. Agents reasoned that if Cleaver did not believe the contents of the letter, it might mislead him to think that the undisclosed member was an FBI informant (Director to San Francisco, February 24, 1971; San Francisco to Director, February 22, 1971). A year earlier, San Francisco agents sent a letter to Cleaver insinuating that the author was Black Panther member Connie Matthews. The San Francisco SAC explained that "an entirely anonymous letter to Cleaver" would be "of little value" because previous anonymous sources were "branded as coming from the 'pigs'" (San Francisco to Director, March 3, 1970). When messages misattributed authorship to actual individuals, agents took extra care to ensure that recipients could not trace the message back to law enforcement. Details about sources were left intentionally vague to avoid bringing suspicion toward the Bureau. In the rationale for sending the letter purportedly from Matthews, the San Francisco field office explained that the contents of the letter were "not sufficiently specific," so that Cleaver might attribute it to other Panther members if Cleaver contacted Matthews, and she denied writing it (San Francisco to Director, March 3, 1970).

For pseudonymous communication to be effective, the Director emphasized that all counterfeit written communication must look authentic. Fake signatures and language of the documents had to confirm the identity of the fictionalized source. The Director reasoned that, should recipients be suspicious of the legitimacy of the message source, it would compromise the entire operation. Thus, the Director denied San Francisco's proposal to deliberately create a letter that Eldridge Cleaver would certainly recognize as fraudulent (Director to San Francisco, February 26, 1971; San Francisco to Director, February 24, 1971). The Director also denied Springfield's proposal to write fake checks using a Panther checkbook obtained from a local police raid on the chapter's headquarters. He explained that the fake signature on the check could "readily be ascertained" and possibly reveal that the Panthers were FBI targets (Director to Springfield, February 24, 1971).

One technique to lend authenticity to counterfeit messages was to include "jargon," intentional errors, and factual inaccuracies in pseudonymous flyers and letters (Director to

Savannah, December 12, 1969; Director to Hong Kong, August 22, 1968; Charlotte to Director, October 26, 1970). In an effort to create friction between The Black Liberators and a less militant Black organization, The Zulu 1200s, the St. Louis field office designed a flyer disparaging the Zulus. Agents explained that the flyer's "tenor and vocabulary were carefully chosen to give the impression that it was written by . . . local black militants." They added that "intentional errors of typing and spelling in the flyers were inserted to add to its 'authenticity'" (St. Louis to Director, October 29, 1968). The St. Louis field office proposed a similar strategy the following year in an effort to create friction between White and Black militants in the area. Agents created a flyer with the title "Storm Warnings" to generate the impression it was written by local right-wing extremists. A memo to the Director explained that the flyer was "sprinkled with factual inaccuracies and exaggerations in order to carry out the theme as a typical 'right-winger' might write it and also to eliminate any suspicion that any official investigation agency assisted in the preparation" (St. Louis to Director, July 11, 1969). The first page of the second issue of Storm Warnings announced that the flyer revealed the identities of local "Communist Functionaries, Black Extremists, and Student Agitators." It also warned readers that "[u]nless we act now to contain these Apostles of Anarchy and Disciples of Destruction, our American White Christian Civilization is headed for certain doom." The Director commended the agents for their efforts, and tentatively approved the request on condition that the office specifically identify the flyer's intended recipients (Director to St. Louis, July 29, 1969).

Another technique to construct the authenticity of anonymous messages was to create each message separately. Messages intended for different recipients by purportedly different fictitious or pseudonymous authors had to be unique and no passages could be taken verbatim from previously written letters. This technique is highlighted in an action that involved mailing letters with similar messages to universities across the country. Each letter was purportedly from a pseudonymous source that attended a university on the opposite coast. The Washington state SAC cautioned that "[t]o be effective, each letter must be original and worded to suit the particular organization to which it is being sent" (WFO to Director, January 12, 1971).

Agents also strategized to conceal the identity of informants from message recipients. One approach was to describe targeted groups' activities and events in vague language that many members of the organization might have used. In one heavily redacted memo, the New Haven SAC explained that agents avoided using exact terminology in their proposed message to avoid revealing the source (New Haven to Director, November 12, 1969). Agents strove to strike a delicate balance between providing enough information to authenticate messages with sufficient vagueness to prevent informants from being identified. They also endeavored to maintain positive relationships with news sources. For both of these reasons, the Director often required that information contained in anonymous messages be available from multiple sources beyond the informants (New York to Director, March 26, 1969; Memphis to Director, 2/26/1969). Responding to Boston's request to deliver information about Stokely Carmichael to a cooperative news source, the Director insisted that "the Bureau must be able to determine if the information is public knowledge so that sources would not be exposed" (Director to Boston, February 8, 1968). In a proposal to send three pseudonymous letters to SNCC members in Atlanta, the Jackson office confirmed

that the letters would not “compromise any Jackson source as information has been made available to the Jackson Division through many sources” (Jackson to Director, May 11, 1968).

***Message Materials Selected to Hide FBI Agents as Sources of Communication***

In addition to creating message content that would mislead recipients about the message source, the Bureau put great care and detail into ensuring that the materials involved in creating and delivering anonymous print communication could not be traced to the Bureau. Memos suggest that the Director scrutinized the material construction and distribution of messages closely. Many memos describe plans for gathering printing materials in far more detail than they explain the message content itself. The Director gave field agents specific instructions in this regard; paper products had to be available in the area from where the purported source of information lived, and stationery and envelopes had to be “unwatermarked” and purchased commercially (Director to San Francisco, January 9, 1969). When agents did not state their intention to purchase materials commercially, the Director would remind them to do so (Director to San Francisco, November 14, 1968; Director to New York, January 28, 1971).

Forged letters written under the names of actual individuals and organizations had to be written on their official stationery (Director to San Francisco, March 25, 1971). For instance, New Haven proposed to write an anonymous letter purportedly from a “disgusted member of the Yale University Alumni” to discourage university officials from allowing BPP member Bobby Seale from speaking on the campus. The Director approved this request on the condition that the letter “be typed on a stationery most likely to be used by a member” of the alumni (Director to New Haven, August 25, 1969). In a different case, the Director tentatively approved San Francisco’s proposal to mail fake expulsion letters to members of the BPP, but the Director later rescinded this approval after San Francisco concluded that they could not access actual BPP letterhead (Director to San Francisco, January 19, 1970).

The Director also required agents to specify how the use of printing technology would disguise the FBI’s role as the message source. FBI agents did not use the Bureau’s own Xerox machines if similar machines were not available in the area, and typewriters had to appear to belong to the fictitious author. For example, the Director approved the creation of a fictitious letter from Hong Kong on condition that the typewriter used be available in that region (Director to Hong Kong, August 22, 1968). In a separate instance, he authorized that a fictitious letter purportedly from an impoverished Ohio Black Panther be sent to BPP headquarters provided that the agents use “a manually operated typewriter with a somewhat used ribbon” (Director to Cincinnati, March 29, 1971).

***Message Delivery Techniques Designed to Hide FBI Agents as Sources of Communication***

In addition to ensuring that printing materials could not be traced back to the Bureau, agents devised specific plans to covertly deliver messages. Letters from pseudonymous or misattributed sources were mailed from the locations they were purported to originate from (Director to New Haven, August 25, 1969; Moore to Sullivan, March 4, 1970). This often required that the Director coordinate actions between field offices, as agents from

one office would create a letter and send it to a different field office for mailing (Director to SACs, Los Angeles, San Francisco, WFO, January 19, 1970; New York to Director, July 29, 1970). Just as the Director instructed agents not to use verbatim passages in materials sent to different audiences, he advised agents to diversify their mailing techniques. For example, San Francisco received approval to mail copies of two articles to local colleges. One article was written by Roy Wilkins, the head of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), and the other was written by Carl Rowan, a newspaper columnist. The Director advised agents to mail the articles separately to different schools "to lessen the possibility of this action appearing to be an organized campaign" (Director to San Francisco, February 27, 1969).

A request submitted by the Washington state field office illustrates the consideration agents put into planning the materials and distribution of counterfeit messages. Agents proposed to create a letter and attribute authorship to Stokely Carmichael, who was living in Guinea at the time. The letter, written ostensibly for a friend of Carmichael's, insinuated that Carmichael planned to harm another member of the Pan African Movement. The agents strategized to create a plausible scenario in which this supposedly endangered individual might "accidentally" receive the forged letter. Agents decided it would be most convincing if the letter stated that it was smuggled out of Guinea to be mailed from France. Washington agents would create the text of the letter and mail it to their Paris contact. Thereafter, the Paris contact would be required to obtain "appropriate type stationery commonly used in Conakry, Guinea, and prepare the letter in English on a French style typewriter. The letter should then be mailed from Orly Airport to New York City." To create a plausible address for the purported source of the message, New York agents would then rent a post office box for a 30-day period under the name of an actual or fictitious friend of Carmichael. The Washington field office then explained how the letter might be constructed to appear as though someone found the letter and decided to send it to the person being threatened.

Once the letter is recovered in New York it should be opened and then placed together with the envelope showing cancellation in Paris, France into another envelope with an anonymous cover letter stating the letter was found on the street.

The agents added that "[t]o make the letter look even more authentic, it could also be stepped on several times to give the appearance of having been trampled on" (WFO to Director, March 19, 1971). Although this proposal is one of the more elaborate requests sent to the Director, it represents the specificity and detail by which agents demonstrated that their communication could not be traced back to the Bureau.

As we note earlier, the Director strongly preferred anonymous print communication to avoid involving third parties in their actions. However, there were instances in which the Director allowed agents to deliver communication to third parties for broader distribution. In most of these instances, the Bureau sought to raise public awareness of the danger that Black activism posed to their communities. In memos requesting and approving the use of third parties, agents and the Director confirmed that the third party individual understood that communication from the FBI was confidential. In one case, Hoover approved the New



York field office's proposal to disseminate public source items about the BPP to the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of New York via one of three church Monsignors. The Director reminded New York agents that "the person to whom this dissemination is made must be advised that the Bureau is not to be divulged as the source of this information" (Director to New York, August 13, 1969). In another example, the Director gave Miami agents the authority to work with a local news producer to create a documentary critical of the NOI. The Director's memo included specific instructions about what information should be included in the documentary and instructed agents to remind the source that "bureau cooperation with him is strictly on a confidential basis" (Director to Miami, February 5, 1969). The Director's willingness to deliver messages through a few select third parties suggests that COINTELPRO was not a completely shadowed campaign; however, it does suggest that COINTELPRO was a closely guarded secret. Only individuals with a proven record of keeping other FBI secrets and sharing the Director's ideological perspective were trusted with information about the Bureau's techniques for disrupting radical Black political organizing.

## Discussion

The COINTELPRO memos reveal a variety of strategies designed to hide the FBI's identity from recipients of the program's external communication. These strategies highlight the value that FBI placed on maintaining their shadowed position. They also elucidate the high degree of coordination required for members to develop collective strategies for keeping secrets from people outside the organization. Rank and file members of the organization routinely deferred to the authority of their supervisors; they provided detailed information about the planning and preparation of external messages to convince the supervisor that secrecy has been thoroughly accounted for; and they sought to ensure secrecy in every stage of their planning process. Organizational members and supervisors had to agree, not only about the content of their messages to external recipients, but about the mechanisms and platforms for delivering those messages. Ultimately, the COINTELPRO memos suggest that the FBI's collective identity as an organization was rooted in a constant concern for hiding aspects of that identity to others outside of the organization.

Our study points to several practical and ethical considerations for decisions about organizational secrecy. From a practical standpoint, the analysis of the copious memos exchanged between FBI offices provides insight into the laborious nature of secret communication. The Director's close attention to message content, materials, and delivery highlights the time and resources involved in keeping the FBI's efforts a secret from individuals outside of the organization. Popular culture including the recent Hollywood film *The Imitation Game* frequently frames the work of secretive organizations as lively and exhilarating. Grey's (2014) account of Great Britain's deciphering program at Bletchley Park during World War II, the inspiration for *The Imitation Game*, provides an intriguing historical narrative of its organizational culture, which was famous for its secret keeping exploits. By contrast, this study reveals that maintaining organizational secrets is often tedious and boring. The routine communication involved in maintaining the FBI's covert status was monotonous work. Although any organization must expend energy and resources to keep information

a secret, the amount of energy required to maintain secrecy is compounded when an entire organization or program must remain hidden.

The variety of strategies that agents discussed with the Director suggests that organization members may be required to devote considerable effort and resources in developing external messages particularly when that communication is intended to deceive others. FBI agents went to great lengths to make pseudonymous letters and leaflets appear authentic. Their memos draw attention to the nuanced (albeit troubling) practices of constructing pseudonymous messages. The types of strategies that FBI agents developed suggests that deceptive communicators must closely attend to the ways in which message content, platforms, and delivery confirm the existence of the fictional identities. Thus, keeping the identities of communicators hidden can be a creative yet time-consuming enterprise.

Another consideration is that secrecy may jeopardize the survival of an organization. Cunningham (2004) contends that the negative publicity that followed from the public revelation of COINTELPRO caused “irreparable harm to the Bureau’s carefully cultivated public image” (p. 36). To this day, many nonviolent activist groups avoid speaking with FBI agents due to their distrust of the organization. Thus, COINTELPRO jeopardized the agency’s ability to engage in their legitimate and overt operations. In this regard, our study revealed an interesting *secrecy paradox*. Although secrecy may be necessary for organization members to achieve their goals, it may also become the reason for an organization’s failure. This aspect of secrecy underscores the inherent susceptibilities of secrecy regarding counterintelligence activities within terrorist groups; no group can actually achieve perfect secrecy while functioning effectively, and every new advantage attained by groups also produces new vulnerabilities (Mobley, 2012). Secrecy is, thus, “discursively powerful, [has] wide-ranging effects on bureaucratic practice and regularly fail[s]” (Fenster, 2015, p. 163).

In addition to these practical considerations, this study highlights several ethical dilemmas of secret organizing, particularly for clandestine organizations that seek to avoid accountability. If, as Simmel (1906) notes, secrets are the basis of social relationships, our article points to the need to distinguish between types of secrets based on the specific purposes that those secrets serve. Secrecy to avoid accountability can have particularly damaging implications for individuals, organization members, and the public. Although secrets shape perceptions of reality (Keane, 2008), messages designed to maintain secrecy may be purposefully misleading and intended to harm others. This observation has additional implications for scholars interested in the symbolic dimensions of anonymous and pseudonymous communication. To understand the social and political consequences of messages with vague or unstated authorship, researchers should consider the institutional influences and motivations for these messages. Even when it is difficult to ascertain who has created a particular message, it is important to consider whose interests are being served by its circulation.

One lesson from the COINTELPRO era of the FBI is that hidden organizing and pseudonymous communication may enable government organizations to subvert the democratic process. Recent scholarship has critiqued reductive treatments of transparency for assuming that full disclosure of organizational practices will necessarily lead to more democratic communication and processes (Christensen & Cheney, 2015; Fenster, 2015). Although

transparency is presumed to generate accountability, there is no guarantee that it will. Furthermore, there are circumstances in which secrecy is needed to preserve the rights and well-being of individuals within an organization. However, this study highlights the continuing importance of transparency as a principle for organizations charged with protecting the public.

Had these memos never been released to the public, we might conclude that radical Black organizations fell into decline in the early to mid-1970s through the process of democratic decision-making. We would not know the FBI launched a concerted propaganda campaign designed to prevent these organizations from operating effectively. Nor would we know that much of the FBI's information about radical Black organizations was false. Although secrecy expands counterintelligence organizations' ability to act efficiently, it also prevents public officials and citizens from evaluating the justness of law enforcement operations.

Under Hoover's FBI, secrecy was the foundation for a culture of impunity. The Director encouraged agents to lie about the activities of targets and approved several actions intentionally designed to cause mental distress and physical injury of targeted individuals, their friends, and their associates. In some of the most egregious examples, Hoover continued to authorize San Diego's dissemination of fabricated documents to the Panthers and US organizations even after they contributed to the ongoing shootouts between the two groups (O'Reilly, 1989). On December 4, 1969, the Chicago police killed BPP leaders Fred Hampton and Mark Clark. Police had access to Hampton's bedroom because the FBI shared information with police that they gathered from secret informant William O'Neal (Haas, 2010). By enabling law enforcement agencies to operate without external oversight or authorization, secrecy can facilitate reprehensible behavior.

### **Future Directions**

Future research might build upon communication approaches to organizational secrecy in a variety of directions. One avenue of research might explore how members resist organizational secrecy. Such research might provide information about the communication practices of dissident members of hidden organizations, and explain how that dissent interacts with broader decision-making within the organization. Future research might also consider how the emergence of electronic media might influence the decision-making processes for keeping secrets within hidden organizations. The FBI's internal memos were circulated in print via teletype; much of their discussion revolved around the use of print communication. Thus, members of current hidden organizations must develop strategies geared toward maintaining anonymity among external recipients who might already be suspicious of printed material.

Further research might also explore how government intelligence organizations and activist movements have adapted their communication in recent decades. Since COINTELPRO's exposure, the public has expressed deep suspicion toward government secrecy and surveillance. WikiLeaks documents reveal that the Department of Homeland Security secretly monitored the Occupy Wall Street movement. In rhetoric eerily reminiscent of Hoover's, the department warned of the movement's "increased potential for violence" despite its

“peaceful nature” (Hastings, 2012). It would be challenging but interesting to learn how social movement organizations adjust their messages given their awareness of the government’s history of secret surveillance. Responding to revelations about the National Security Agency’s secret collection of Americans’ phone records, civic groups and political leaders have increasingly criticized government agencies’ covert operations. Additional research could shed light on how government agencies have revised and legitimized their uses of secrecy. Given the stakes for organization members and the public, organizational secrecy merits further scrutiny and research. As our technological capacities for secrecy have grown with the rise of digital media, this line of research will continue to have practical and scholarly implications for organizations and democracy.

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## Notes

1. The Smith Act, otherwise known as the Alien Registration Act of 1940, criminalized communication advocating the overthrow of the U.S. government and required all noncitizen adults to register with the government.
2. Throughout our analysis, citations from “the Director” reflect the language of the memos. Presumably, Hoover was the author of messages sent under the Director’s title, but his assistant directors may also have authored memos under this title. We sometimes refer to the Director as “he” given that no women were hired as Bureau agents when COINTELPRO was active.

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